
Tara Williams
written testimony
to the Joint
Legislative
Ad Hoc Committee
on Freedom of
Expression at
Arizona's Public
Universities



Thank you, co-chairs, Senator Kern and Representative Nguyen, for the invitation to provide written testimony to the Joint Legislative Ad Hoc Committee on Freedom of Expression at Arizona's Public Universities. I welcome the opportunity.

I share the university's strong commitment to free speech and demonstrated that in all actions surrounding the Health, Wealth & Happiness (HWH) event. My focus was on protecting the free speech of all involved, ensuring that the event could take place successfully and safely, and providing support to all students.

A few key points, which I will address in more detail below:

- In line with ASU's policy on free speech, I was consistently clear with Ann Atkinson that the HWH event would take place and we would do everything possible to make sure it did so safely. I never suggested that it be cancelled; the only person who suggested cancelling the event is Ann herself.
- I did ask Ann to make a statement at the beginning of the HWH event: a statement affirming ASU's commitment to free speech.
- We publicized the HWH event through all of the usual channels for Barrett student events — and more — even though Ann described the primary audience as potential donors.
- We have no record of any student who raised concerns to the college about faculty suggesting they not attend the event. After my office received a letter from faculty raising concerns about the event, faculty were reminded that while they could express their views, they should not pressure their students to attend the event or not.
- The decision that we could not continue the executive director position after the withdrawal of the donor funding was difficult, but purely financial. We made the decision that students were better served by continuing the programs and courses than by continuing to fund a highly-paid administrative position for a center that had ceased to exist.

The Lewis Center

I was excited about a center focused on personal development when I accepted the position here — it was one of the factors that persuaded me to leave my previous position as dean of The University of Alabama Honors College. After my arrival, I met every week or every other week with Ann and worked with her to identify and attend key Lewis Center events, including multiple speaker events (and the HWH event). I never intervened on any speaker selection.

In one of my first meetings with Ann, she mentioned that she was planning an event on the theme of “Health, Wealth & Happiness” for Feb. 8, 2023. Ann described the event as a “fundraiser,” primarily focused on reaching potential donors and highlighting the positive impact of the Lewis Center to a broader audience. She indicated that the speakers would be prior center speakers who were volunteering their time because they believed in the mission and work of the center.

Discussion of postponement of the Feb. 8 event

I never encouraged Ann to cancel or postpone the HWH event; in fact, I made clear on multiple occasions that I was committed to making sure the event proceeded successfully and safely for all involved. After receiving some negative feedback, she called me and expressed her wish to cancel it, saying that it didn't represent what she or the center stood for. I encouraged her to talk with Tom Lewis; she was concerned that he wouldn't take the suggestion of a cancellation well, so we discussed the possibility that she might propose a postponement rather than a cancellation. After speaking with Mr. Lewis, she decided to move forward, and we did.

The statement prior to the Feb. 8 event

Based on the recommendation of the Situational Response Team that often supports high-profile speaker events, I asked Ann to make a statement at the beginning of the event affirming ASU's commitment to free speech. The purpose of this request was to help discourage disruptions of the event and support a calm environment for those who attended to listen to the speakers. Ann suggested drawing on ASU's previous statements in this area, and I agreed that would be a good approach. Once she drafted that statement, centered on President Crow's public comments on ASU's commitment to free speech, no edits were required or even requested.

Here is that section from the script: *“Before I introduce our first speaker, there are a few things I would like to say about free speech. This particular event has brought up public discourse about free speech. In the words of ASU President Michael Crow, ‘ASU is committed to free, robust and uninhibited sharing of ideas.’ President Crow also believes that ASU strives ‘to provide an environment that fosters the fullest degree of intellectual freedom and free expression.’”*

Marketing the Feb. 8 event

Despite the fact that Ann had designated only a fraction of the HWH event tickets for students (anyone with a student ID from any high school or university, not just Barrett students), we publicized the event through all of the usual channels for Barrett student events: the email newsletter, social media, digital screens around the college, and physical flyers. The event also was promoted through a preview article the week before the event in ASU News.

Because Ann pitched the event as primarily for an audience of community members and potential donors, we also advertised it via channels that we have not used for any other recent event: Ticketmaster and paid digital ads.

Looking a little deeper, the 'Honors Digest' email newsletter went out to all roughly 6,500 Barrett students.

The event also was included in the Downtown Bulletin on Feb. 6 and advertised on all Barrett campus Instagram accounts on Jan. 30. Paid Google advertising ran from Jan. 23 to Feb. 8, the date of the event. It received a total of 1,056,749 impressions and generated 4,215 clicks. The event, actually, is still listed on the ASU Events page: <https://asuevents.asu.edu/event/lewis-center-presents-health-wealth-happiness>.

Some have mentioned that some of the physical flyers were removed from inside of Barrett. If any flyers were removed, it was not at the direction of ASU or Barrett leadership.

Barrett leadership did authorize rotating this event out of the digital boards in favor of other events shortly after we began receiving complaints about the event, and prior to my receiving a letter from Barrett faculty raising concerns about how the event had been planned. In making this decision, we considered whether rotating this announcement out would result in individuals who might want to attend being unaware of the event. We decided that it would not, especially given that the event was primarily directed at the community, and that community-focused promotion through paid Google ads would continue. In addition, we knew that students would receive notice of the event through other means such as the Honors Digest, and that the increasing social media discussion of the event had the effect of increasing awareness of it by both students and the community.

Barrett communications staff similarly determined that, given social media awareness and the continuing potential for disruptions, it was not necessary to depart from our customary practice as Ann had requested and to make a second Instagram posting about the event.

The event ultimately attracted a large number of in-person attendees, both students and community members. Tens of thousands more viewed it online, even though Ann chose to livestream and post it on the website of one of the speakers rather than using Barrett's existing YouTube channel.

Student complaints

Barrett regularly interacts with students and their families who raise questions or concerns about their experiences, and we heard from students, families and community members about this event. However, we do not have any record of a student complaining to me or our Assistant Dean of Students about a faculty member pressuring students not to attend the event or threatening their grade. On the contrary, faculty who raised their own concerns about the event were intentional about not calling for its cancellation or scheduling anything that would conflict; in fact, many explicitly encouraged students to attend.

Encouraging students to explore and interact with a wide variety of perspectives is at the very heart of our mission and our curriculum. Our signature course, The Human Event, introduces students to ideas and texts from throughout human history. It is designed to encourage students to discuss different viewpoints, to consider multiple possible interpretations, and to build arguments that are based on rigorous evaluations of evidence.

Fundraising for the Lewis Center

I affirmed to Ann the importance of identifying additional donors to fund the Lewis Center. The appropriate process would be to introduce prospective donors to the dean and/or the ASU Foundation, so I repeatedly asked Ann to share the list of prospective donors attending the HWH event with our Foundation contact. She eventually connected with our contact, but would not share the full list. At the HWH event reception that was designed to facilitate donor connections, Ann did not introduce me or the ASU Foundation representative to any prospects.

When Mr. Lewis later informed us of his decision to end the funding for the center, I asked Ann to develop a plan to operate with a reduced budget. Ann proposed making small reductions and asserted that she could raise funds to cover a portion of the operating and programming costs; she later claimed that she would have been able to make up the entire gap caused by losing the funding from Mr. Lewis. However, she never brought forward to me or to the Foundation any donors who were willing to make those gifts.

Winding down the Lewis Center after Mr. Lewis' withdrawal of funding

As dean, it is my responsibility to balance Barrett's budget and allocate its funding to serve our students. After careful analysis, I determined that we could not continue the executive director position without the donor support. This is commonplace as ASU, like all universities, has centers that come and go, along with their center directors, based on donor or grant funding. In this instance, the executive director salary was almost 30% of the overall budget and was set higher than that of any the other Barrett employees — faculty, staff, or administrator — who report to me as dean. Our priority needed to be offering courses and programs for the students.

Once the final decision was made, I wanted to give Ann as much advance notice as possible and so I notified her at that point (rather than waiting until the official letter could be sent, in line with ASU HR processes, two weeks before the position end date). I met with her, along with Barrett's director of fiscal and business operations, to inform her of the decision. I explained that the decision was based on the financial situation, she was leaving in good standing, and I would be available to provide a positive reference for her.

I also asked Ann to provide a pass-down of key practices, contacts, and plans for the future that would help us move forward with continued student programming. She never responded and did not show up for a meeting to discuss that transition (which she had confirmed her availability to attend).

Personal development programming

In order to move forward with the impactful elements previously offered through the T.W. Lewis Center for Personal Development, I appointed a faculty and staff task force. They have recommended that we prioritize two areas of programming that students found particularly valuable: one focused on speakers' career journeys and personal stories and one focused on practical life skills. We are now making plans to move forward with those recommendations.

We have also been collecting input from students who were closely involved with the Lewis Center and will be working with them on the implementation phase. The Lewis Center courses remain on the fall schedule and are being taught by the same faculty who taught them previously through the center; based on the task force recommendations, we are also planning a range of these courses for the spring schedule and beyond.

I appreciate the opportunity to provide these important details to you and the entire Joint Legislative Ad Hoc Committee on Freedom of Expression at Arizona's Public Universities. Thank you.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tara Williams". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Tara Williams

Dean of Barrett, The Honors College